

COINS, CULTS, HISTORY AND INSCRIPTIONS IV

Studies in Honor of Al. N. Oikonomides

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A Previously Unpublished Seal-Ring from Ptolemaic Egypt: *Heraklean* Iconography of Engraved Gems and Rings

On a previous visit to Chicago I was able to see a unique seal-ring from the Ptolemaic period of Egypt. The object is presently part of a private collection in Athens.¹ It is in fair condition, with half of the hoop missing. The engraved portion remains fully intact and the bezel measures 17mm in diameter. The circular bezel with the thick and flat sides of the hoop enable us to assign it a date of late fourth century BC.

Although the ring constituted part of a larger collection of antiquities in the United States, the image engraved upon it was never identified. A naked man of well defined proportions may be seen standing in three-quarter back view, his left hand extended upwards behind his back, his right extended forward. He has a beard and a peaked cap. At the edge of his left hand three parts of an item may be noticed, the two forming a right angle, and the third a curve joining the other two. The left arm seems to be covered by a not so well defined object or garment. It is my contention that the seal on the ring represents Herakles holding a club in his right hand and an arrow in his left. From his left arm hangs part of the famous lion's skin, the rest circling his back with the head of the animal crowning the hero's head. Herakles' connection to Hellenistic Egypt is well known both from the literary sources and the archaeological discoveries. Although the use of the artifact deserves to be studied and presented separately, it may be said that the ring was in the ownership of an individual of moderate means to whom Herakles may have had religious significance, or even constituted a subject of worship as we know was the case in Ptolemaic Egypt.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is home to a fine example of a similar representation of Herakles.² That item was purchased in Cyprus at the end of the last century and has been assigned the date of 450 BC. It is described as "Herakles holding bow and club, with lion's skin hanging over the left arm". Here, also, the hero is bearded and nude.

In the Lewis Collection in Corpus Christi College, a bearded Herakles much like the one on the ring is portrayed with a lion's skin over his head. Also, in the same collection we find a copy of an ancient gem where Herakles is holding a club and bow, with the lion's skin tied around his waist. Although a few more such representations of the Greek hero exist, these particular ones support the identification of Herakles on the ring from Egypt.³

A subsequent examination of engraved gems and seals in the British Museum leads us to the identification of two gems (nos. 401 and 406 in the collection) which also portray Herakles in the same manner as the ring from Egypt.⁴ Both objects were found in Tharros but no attempt was made to identify the scenes as a Greek motif. However, the striking resemblance of these two gems with that of on the ring from Egypt enables us to ponder the origin of the "Herakles" motif. The figure on No. 401 was described as "an archer wearing trousers, shoes, coat, and peaked cap"; on No. 406 as "a nude man with bow and club"; both are made of green jasper.

Finally, in the Harari Collection an engraved gem depicts a man with pointed beard much like the man on our ring.⁵

¹Copyright laws restrict the use of photographs from private collections already published, so we cannot include any such plates or figures as visual aids for the artifacts discussed in this article. *In accordance to international law the use of the photograph here remains the property of the owner and may not be reproduced under any circumstances.* [The editors of *The Ancient World* make no claim or assertion to any provision of the U.S. Copyright Law regarding the use of photographs of objects in private collections.]

²G.M.A. Richter, *Catalogue of Engraved Gems in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York 1956) no. 71.

³Martin Henig, *The Lewis Collection of Engraved Gemstones in Corpus Christi College, BAR Supplementary Series I* (Cambridge 1975) nos. 348 and 367.

⁴H. B. Walters, *Catalogue of the Engraved Gems and Cameos in the British Museum* (Oxford 1926) nos. 401 and 406.

⁵J. Boardman and D. Scarisbrick, *The Ralph Harari Collection of Finger Rings* (1977).

The similarities among engraved gems in various collections and the ring from Egypt are easily noticeable. The continued study of "Heraklean" iconography on engraved gems and rings should provide essential information for further identification of other engraved gems and seal-rings.

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